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**UNDERSTANDING ISLAM AND ITS IMPACT ON LATIN
AMERICA**

by

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Preface

I began this research project with a desire to learn more about radical Islamic fundamentalism and the terrorist groups that feed on its theology and ideology. Other than a couple of temporary duty assignments to the Middle East, I had little experience or prior knowledge of the topic. However, I had the advantage during my National Defense Fellowship at the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University to interact with numerous scholars knowledgeable on Islam and terrorism, attend lectures and debates on the topic, and simply enough time to contemplate and think about the topic.

Initially I was torn between a desire to focus my research solely on Latin America instead of radical Islam. My three-year assignment as the Assistant Air Attaché in Buenos Aires had given me additional insights about the region that I desired to further develop. I appreciate the guidance of Professor Jorge Dominguez, the director of Harvard's Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, for suggesting a blending of the two topics, as well as Professor Monica Duffy Toft, assistant director of the Olin Institute, for her encouragement. This project should be helpful to those who have an general interest in Islamic fundamentalism, and its impact to the area south of our border.

Abstract

Islamic terrorism has become arguably one of the most important security topics since 9/11. This research paper will not answer every question about Islamic fundamentalism, but will build on the existing body of research. The author has relied primarily on unclassified open source material and his own experience in Latin America for source material.

The goal of this paper is to determine whether U.S. national security interests should be more concerned about radical Islamic influence and support in Latin America and the Caribbean. The findings point to a mild level of concern, but perhaps not to the heightened threat that some have suggested. There are two fundamental reasons: demographically, there are simply not very many Muslims in Latin America, and secondly, there is minimal history of Islamic terrorist attacks in the region. Within certain lawless areas of Latin America known for illicit activities and Arab immigration, Islamic fundamentalists have a foothold. However, research points to Shi'ite terrorist groups like Hezbollah as the perpetrators rather than Sunni-based al Qaeda. Although more can be done, the extra surveillance and increased attention since 9/11 by the U.S. in cooperation with Latin American partners has helped control and monitor the problem.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Since September 11, 2001, that dreadful day that is forever sketched in the memories of people around the world, Westerners have probably displayed more interest, curiosity, and questioning of Islam than ever before. There have been numerous books published, op-ed pieces written, and scholarly research accomplished. At the core of many of these works, the authors and researchers are trying to explain why Islam, and in particular radical or fundamentalist Islam, is seen as a threat to Western security. Some scholars have suggested the fundamental problem is not terrorism, but one of religion and ideology, at least as perceived by Islamic fundamentalists. President Bush says the U.S. is not at war with Islam and this is true. But if Islamic extremists are not convinced of this reality, the U.S. may not be properly identifying the threat.

The first portion of this paper will look at various perspectives of “Islam” and the “Islamic threat.” Is the Islamic threat simply a small band of religious fanatics who have hijacked Islam or, is the Islamic threat more on the grand scale of Samuel P. Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”? Some scholars argue that promoting moderate Islam is the solution to countering the radical threat. The struggle within Islam, between the moderates and the radicals, has

implications not only for Islamic countries, but also for areas of the world where Muslims are the minority population including Latin America and the Caribbean.

Whether U.S. national security policy makers should be concerned about radical Islamic influence, support, and actions in pockets of Latin America and the Caribbean is an open question. The research findings point to a level of mild concern and interest regarding the level of Islamic fundamentalism in Latin America and the Caribbean, but not great alarm and apprehension.

There are several keys to understanding why the Islamic threat is nominal. First and most important, the demographics do not favor the growth of Islamic fundamentalism because there are simply not very many Muslims in Latin America. Secondly, the region has a fairly extensive history of terrorist attacks, but not from Islamic groups. What exists in Latin America is a history of Islamic support activities, especially on the part of Shi'ite groups such as Hezbollah but not radicals such as al Qaeda.

However, there are certain areas within the region such as the Tri-Border Area between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay and Venezuela's Margarita Island where terrorist support activities probably necessitate extra vigilance. Additionally, there is a possibility of a nexus between terrorist organizations and criminal elements such as drug traffickers. Since there is a lack of hard evidence proving a connection between criminal elements and terrorists, the possibility remains speculation at this point.

Ignoring the possibility of an Islamic threat in Latin America is a mistake. The key to success is continuing U.S. cooperation with Latin American partners through

cooperative structures. Thankfully, there are already organizations in place to facilitating this action.

Chapter 2

Understanding “Islamic Fundamentalism”

As with many controversial topics such as Islamic fundamentalism, the defenders of their positions seek the high ground by defining the terms from their perspective. This section will examine and explore the various scholarly and intellectual perspectives of Islam. This is a huge challenge to say the least due to the amount of resources published by academics and scholars since 9/11. However, a consolidation of the myriad of viewpoints in a concise manner will in understanding Islamic fundamentalism.

More than a Religion

One of the first challenges when looking at Islam through Western eyes is the absence of a word in Arabic for Islam as a religion. According to the Qur'an, Islam is *Deen*, and *Deen* is usually translated as religion or *mazhab*. However, *Deen* from the Muslims' perspective is not only a “religion,” but also a code of life, a social system, an all encompassing law and structure that comes from Allah alone. *Mazhab* means a passage or path made by man which would apply to every other religion but Islam.¹ This is one of the first clues of a possible wide gulf between followers of Islam and those of Western democracy ideals.

Furthermore, even scholars of Islam have a difficult time deciding what to call the various followers of Islam. The terms political Islam, Islamism, traditional Islam, radical Islam, Wahhabism, Salafism,² militant Islam, Islamic movement, and moderate Islam are all pregnant with meaning. The bias and partiality of each author becomes quite apparent when investigating the different scholarly perspectives. However, the important point is Islamic fundamentalism's proximity to the religious mainstream, in contrast to the distance of Islamic modernism, puts Muslims at ease with its message.³

For example, which category would Osama bin Laden and al Queda fit in? Through Western eyes, these two would probably be identified with radical Islam, maybe even an extreme radical Islamic category. On the other hand, some in the Islamic world may view bin Laden and al Queda as fighting for the purest form of Islam. This paper will refer to Muslims who believe they are adhering to the closest form of Islam as taught by their founder Muhammad as Islamic Fundamentalists.

Perspectives of Islam

Islam has a history full of conflict from the time Muhammad died in 632 AD down to today. Islam comprises two main divisions: the great majority are Sunnis and the minority, around 17 percent, are Shi'ites. Followers of Shi'a Islam constitute not only a majority of the Muslims in Iran and Iraq, but these countries also have the largest concentration of Shi'ites in the world. Saudi Arabia has a majority of Sunnis that practice a stricter and more conservative form of Islam called Wahhabism. Sufis, or teachers and practitioners of spiritual Islam, are a large community within both Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Additionally, there are many sects within Sunni and Shi'a traditions.

Regardless of these two main divisions and the various traditions, sects, and practices of Islam, two Western perspectives of Islam are dominant today in scholarly circles. In one camp, those that view the Islamic resurgence as a major concern to the West could be called the confrontationalists. The other group could be called the accomodationalists and desire to paint Islam more as a religion of peace that is given a “bad image” by a small minority of radicals and terrorists. The accomodationalists see the confrontationalists’ stance as creating an imaginary united Islam, and argue the Arab/Islamic world is much more divided than some Western commentators would like to confess. Of course, there are many who would fall in the middles of these two opposing sides. Here’s a sampling of their perspectives.

Confrontationalists

Some of the well known in this camp is Harvard University’s Samuel Huntington, Princeton University’s Bernard Lewis, and Daniel Pipes of the US Institute for Peace. The grand overarching viewpoint is characterized by Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations”⁴ concept and a resurgence of the Islamic ideals, politics, and culture.

Huntington

According to Huntington, Muslims are turning toward Islam as a source of identity, meaning, stability, legitimacy, development, power, and hope. He calls this an Islamic Resurgence due to the fact that Muslims are one fifth of the world’s population and the movement has the similar implications to other major movements such as the Protestant Reformation and the Revolutions in America and Russia. The Islamic cultures are making renewed efforts to find solutions not in Western ideologies but in Islam. There is an acceptance of modernity, but a rejection of Western culture and a desire to use Islam

as the guide to life in the modern world. Religion is seen as perhaps the central force that motivates and mobilizes Muslims.⁵

The extent of this movement is pervasive throughout the Muslim world. By the middle of the last decade, every country with a predominantly Muslim population, except Iran, was more Islamic and Islamist culturally, socially, and politically than it was fifteen years earlier. The majority of Muslims are seeing “Islam as the solution” to their development problems and resent Western influence in their cultures. This Resurgence is an effort to achieve the goal of modernizing their countries but in a distinctly Islamic manner. It is mainstream not extremist, pervasive not isolated, and a rededication to Islam by Muslim populations.⁶

Lewis

As a historian, Lewis paints the clash from the broad view of almost 1400 years of Islamic history. His central theme is that from the seventh century until the Ottomans failed for the second time to sack Christian Vienna in 1683, Muslims and their culture were dominant and powerful throughout the Islamic world. For the last 300 years or so, Islam has been on the defensive and Muslims have watched in horror and humiliation as the Christian civilizations of Europe and North America overshadow them militarily, economically, and culturally.⁷

Lewis related in an interview shortly after 9/11, “In a sense, they’ve been hating us for centuries, and it’s very natural that they should. You have this millennial rivalry between two world religions, and now, from their point of view, the wrong one seems to be winning.”⁸ The notion of jihad is especially important in understanding this rivalry. Even though there is debate among Islamic scholars about the meaning of jihad, Lewis

claims for most of recorded Muslim history the correct interpretation is an armed struggle for the defense or advancement of Muslim power. Although primarily a fundamentalist idea, it is not that far out of the Islamic mainstream to consider this struggle continuing until the entire world either adopts Islam or submits to Muslim rule.⁹

Pipes

Pipes describes the challenge in terms of Islamism, a terroristic and militant version of Islam with totalitarian roots in struggle against moderate Islam. Even though he does not paint the picture as a pure clash of civilizations, he believes the majority of Muslims support the ideology and beliefs of the fundamentalists. This helps explain the joy within the Muslim world following the attacks on 9/11.¹⁰ Furthermore, the struggle between the West and the Islamic world is ultimately one of ideas and armies, not of law enforcement or religion. Just as World War II and the Cold War were ideological conflicts, Islamism has a grip on the majority of Muslims and this must be defeated. Pipes thinks militant Islam is the problem, but moderate Islam is the solution.¹¹

Accommodationists

The Accommodationists view the Islamic world as very fragmented and divided from within, not as a unified block. This viewpoint claims the confrontationalists are creating a civilizational threat that comes from historical fallacy. These scholars tend to blame the radicalization of Muslims on U.S. policies such as support for Israel, long-standing hegemony of the West, and support for the oppressive and degenerate regimes in the Middle East. This camp attempts to understand and explain the reasons behind the fundamentalism of Islam and point out that radicalism flourishes where there is an absence of economic equality and political freedom. Some of the scholars associated with

this position are Georgetown University's John Esposito, Columbia University's Edward Said (recently deceased), and Cato Institute's Leon Hadar.

Esposito

Esposito posits the West's rising perception of "Islamic radicalism" may be more about filling the security threat vacuum left by the ending of the Cold War than a "Clash of Civilizations." He does not deny the growth of Islam and Islamic movements, but says it is simply wrong to tie the violent actions of a few with the broad and legitimate democratic aspirations of many. He stresses this phenomenon is more of an Islamic Revivalism than Resurgence. Revivalism in this sense is a return to Islam in personal and public life that will ensure the restoration of Islamic identity, values, and power, but still accept modernization.¹²

He criticizes the sensationalized and monolithic approach of the confrontationists that reinforce the generalizations and stereotypes of Muslims. The focus on radicalism and equating Islam with extremism that threatens the West is too common in the media and government. This selective analysis fails to tell the whole story of Islam and provide a full context for wide variety of Muslim attitudes, events, and diversity. He thinks the vast majority of Muslims have little interest in the radical or fundamentalist movements. The concept that Islam and Muslims are portrayed as the instigators and protagonists in fourteen centuries of warfare is wrongheaded.¹³

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the resurgence of Islam and modernization are compatible, he argues. The Islamists desire to bring their societies up to technological levels of modern industrial society but within Islamic civil society and without the Western influences.¹⁴

Said

Said is probably best known for his defense of the Palestinians and his criticism of how the West makes malicious generalizations about Islam based on Orientalism. According to Said, Orientalism occurs when the world is divided up into an “us versus them” mentality, viewing Islam as a threatening “Other.” The perception of the Islamic threat only exists because the West generally depicts Muslims as fanatical, violent, and irrational.¹⁵ In other words, the West has an awareness problem and an incorrect understanding of Islam because of a desire to compartmentalize the world.

Hadar

According to Hadar, Islam is neither unified nor a threat to the West. The supposed worldwide threat from militant Islam has simply replaced the perception of danger experienced during the Cold War from Soviet communism. Instead of the Red Menace, the West has made the Green Peril, green being the color of Islam, our new global threat.¹⁶ Islam is a religion, not a radical ideology threatening Western peace. He claims it is a mistake to portray the struggle between militant Islam and the West as a zero-sum game that can only end in the defeat of one of the sides. This supposed monolithic threat is nothing more than taking isolated events and trends in the Muslim world and using the old Cold War jargon to describe the struggle with Islam.¹⁷

Islam is also open to various interpretations and is used to support democracy, dictatorship, republicanism, and monarchy. Islamic fundamentalism should not be viewed as a disease that spreads to infect whole populations. In fact, it is conceivable that a new Islamic force will play the same constructive political role that the Protestant reformation placed in Europe.¹⁸

Islamic Anti-Western Rage: Historic and Strategic Explanations

Why do Islamic terrorists kill and what explains the anti-Western rage? Did Americans stir up the rage and bring it on themselves because of U.S. policies? Maybe their rage is less a clash against the West than a conflict between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Also, what if all Islamic fundamentalists' demands were met such as resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, no Western presence in the Islamic world, and Islamic rule in the region. Would there still be a threat? The answers to these simple, but critical questions are as important as defining Islam. Later in the paper, the focus will turn to Latin America to evaluate the threat from Islamic fundamentalism and Islamists. The answers may have policy implications for this region, either to discount the threat or raise a legitimate concern. But first, this section explores possible reasons to understand the roots of Islamic fundamentalists' anger.

Impact of Colonialism

For nearly 1000 years, the Islamic world enjoyed a position of power, influence, and prestige. The colonial expansion by European powers throughout the Middle East brought this period to a close. Not since the Crusades had the West and Muslims clashed over lands and influence in areas considered Islamic. The colonial period may have impacted Muslims more than any other peoples. Islamic civilization places heavy emphasis on control of the land, so the loss of control to the Europeans had a lasting effect. Secondly, Islamic autonomism provided Muslims with a unique drive to defy foreign domination. Unlike other peoples that were colonialized, the Muslims continued to defy. Because Islam requires its adherents to wield political power, the colonial experience especially bruised Muslims.¹⁹

Today, Muslims are torn between how to modernize and deal with globalization. They generally have an admiration for what the West does, mixed with resentment for the fact that the U.S. and Europe fares so well. Muslims have a desire to imitate its results but an unwillingness to emulate its actions. There is an emotional rejection of the West, but at the same time a material dependence on the West.²⁰

United States Foreign Policy

Rather than focusing on religious and cultural differences as a cause of the hostility, a number of scholars place the source of Islamic militancy on U. S. foreign policy. They argue that Muslim extremists like Osama bin Laden loathe the U. S. primarily because its foreign policy. The basis for this judgment is primarily the public opinion polls taken in the Islamic world in recent years.

In early 2003, Zogby International conducted a survey involving 2,620 men and women in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. When questioned, most had “unfavorable attitudes” toward the United States and indicated their hostility was based primarily on U.S. policy rather than their values. Not surprisingly, the issue that arouses the most hostility is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Muslim perception of U.S. caused Palestinian suffering.²¹

Viewed from an exclusively Western perspective, the creation of the state of Israel represented Jewish national redemption especially considering the Holocaust and the centrality of Jewish presence in Christian, particularly evangelical, thought about Palestine. But from an Islamic and Arab perspective, the state of Israel never has been understood this way. They view Zionism in Palestine as trampling over the existing Arab majority, destroying Palestinian society, and dispossessing its Arab inhabitants. The

dominant view of the Islamic world is that the pro-Israel lobby shapes American foreign policy regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, which intensifies the Islamic anger at the U.S.²²

The Zogby poll also found that most Arabs have a different perspective of the U.S. led war in Iraq. A strong majority felt the U.S. attacked Iraq to gain control of Iraqi oil and to help Israel. They do not accept the premise that the U.S. overthrew Saddam Hussein out of humanitarian motives.²³

In fact, most Muslims view the U.S. fight against terror as a war against the Islamic world. A 2003 Pew survey found that even Indonesians, Pakistanis, and Turks were either somewhat or very worried about a potential U.S. threat to their countries. This is especially surprising because these are countries whose governments generally cooperate with the U.S. in the war on terror. It's more than startling when around half of the Muslims surveyed list bin Laden as one of the three world figures in whom they had the most confidence "to do the right thing."²⁴

Presence of Foreign Military Forces

Robert Pape from the University of Chicago posits a similar but more straightforward explanation for all terrorism, not just Islamic terrorism. He has compiled a database of every suicide bombing and attack around the globe from 1980 to 2001, a total of 188. He found that a Marxist-Leninist group called the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka committed the majority of the attacks, 75 in all. His research suggests little connection between suicide terrorism and religion. He finds that what nearly all suicide terrorist campaigns have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal. The primary goal in most cases is to coerce liberal democracies to withdraw military forces and control from

territory that the terrorists consider their homeland. Although religion is often used as a tool by terrorism organizations in recruiting and other efforts in the broad strategic objective, it is not the root cause. Lebanon, Israel, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, and Chechnya are examples of conflicts where suicide terrorists are striving to establish or maintain political self-determination by compelling a democratic power to withdraw.²⁵

Globalization

If U.S. foreign policy or the presence of military forces is a source of Muslims' anger, an even more encompassing root of anger may be globalization and the opposition to secular modern states. Viewed from the Islamic fundamentalist perspective, globalization represents secularism and a force in opposition to Islam. This conflict is not just a worldly struggle in their eyes, but also a sacred battle against the secular state represented by the U.S.

Under the authority of religion, the fundamentalists wrap themselves in moral legitimacy and employ violence in assaulting symbols of global economic and political power. Religion has provided them a metaphor of cosmic war, a fight between good and bad, truth and evil. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad, symbols of globalization, were in that sense very religious.²⁶

An important distinction must be made between different types of modernity and globalization. In one sense, the al Qaeda network is a modern and transnational player, a symbol of globalization. Its members are sophisticated and technically skilled professionals, come from different nationalities, and use modern communications. In this sense, they are not opposed to modernity and globalization, so long as it fits their own purposes. But fundamentalists loath the Western-style modernity that they perceive

secular globalization is forcing upon them.²⁷ This push/pull and a need to compromise in order to develop and modernize can be terribly frustrating to fundamentalists.

This resistance to Western-style modernity even reminds some Muslims of earlier colonialism. During an interview, a leader in the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas gave his opinion about globalization. “Globalization is just a new colonial system. It is America’s attempt to dominate the rest of the world economically rather than militarily. It will worsen the gap between rich and poor. America is trying to spread its consumer culture. These values are not good for human beings. The problem with pursuing capitalism as an end itself is that the name of the game is the dollar. In the West, money really does talk. This is bad for the human beings. It leads to disaster for communities.”²⁸

Islamic Angst: Psychological and Religious Struggles

Thus far, this paper has given some possible explanations for Islamists’ rage and anger toward the West, focusing more on strategic issues. However, it seems unlikely that colonialism, the Crusades, globalization, or military presence fully explains their loathing and hatred. There may be psychological, religious, or deeper spiritual issues that provide additional explanations. Also, the profound chasm between the Sunnis and the Shi’ites, or for that matter the clash between the moderates and fundamentalists, both need exploration. Maybe the West is simply caught in the middle of rival factions vying for political power in the name of religion. Additionally, although the Islamic rage seems to be a recent phenomenon, it could have deeper roots in history. The following are various explanations and perspectives that help explain Islamic angst and anguish.

Humiliation

Jessica Stern, a renowned terrorism expert, highlights one of the most basic psychological reasons for this rage in a recent book, *Terror in the Name of God*. Stern writes a whole chapter highlighting why she thinks humiliation is one of the major causal factors giving rise to desperation and uncontrollable rage among Palestinians. She discovered in her interviews with Palestinians at many different levels of society, from professionals to terrorists, an epidemic of despair and individual hopelessness. The Islamic terrorist leaders are able to tap into this sense of outrage and humiliation to encourage youth to murder Israeli civilians.²⁹

One can argue that the despair and hopelessness is simply limited to Palestinians, caused by the result of Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza, or the Israeli support in the West. However due to the special role that Jerusalem plays in Islam, this sense of humiliation probably extends throughout the Islamic world. Granted the Israeli and Palestine conflict has its own set of dynamics, but it offers one possible explanation for the rage among many Muslims, not just Palestinians. Could this rage and/or desire for violent action extend back even further?

The Assassins

An early sect of Shi'a Islam, called the Ismailis, began a practice that may have laid some early groundwork for today's Islamic terrorists, especially those that target fellow Muslims. Beginning in the medieval period and within a few centuries after the founding of Islam, the secretive sect called Ismailis were known for unprecedented employment of planned, systematic, and long-term use of terror as a political weapon. Although not the

first group in history to use murder to accomplish political goals, the Ismailis, unlike previous political murderers, were using terror for strategic effects.³⁰

In fact, the English word assassin has its roots in the Arabic language. During the Crusades, the Christian warriors were warned about the Assassins and the precautions needed to guard against them. Although the Crusaders did not know the exact origins of the Assassins, they were regarded as hired killers who were ruthless and competent.³¹

However, the vast majority of the Assassins' victims were Muslims, not Crusaders. Their attacks were directed not against outsiders, but against the dominant elites and the prevailing ideas in the Islamic world of their time. Unlike today's Islamic terrorists, the Assassins never harmed ordinary people but focused on the great and powerful.³²

Nevertheless, there are several parallels from the Assassins that apply today. After the Assassin struck his victim, no attempt to escape or rescue him was made. On the contrary, to survive a mission was seen as a disgrace. This was not considered suicide, which has always been forbidden in Islam. Secondly, a constant theme of the Assassins was to purify the faith and overthrow the existing Sunni order in Islam to replace it with their own. This theme of striving to purify the faith could still be a factor today.

Impact of Wahhabism

Less than a century had passed after the death of the founder of Islam before major conflict arose among Muslims. The struggle that began in the seventh century for the heart of Islam between Sunnis and Shi'ites continues today. Some scholars suggest there is a failure of Western political and intellectual leaders to adequately understand the internal crisis in Islam, and the conflict between tradition and extremism. Author Stephen

Schwartz has argued in his book, *The Two Faces of Islam*, that the primary root of these problems is Wahhabism.

Wahhabism is the puritanical form of Islam founded by Muhammad ibn-Abdul Wahhab in the early eighteenth century. Wahhab called for a return to tradition and what he proclaimed was the purest form of Islam. Wahhab's desire and goal was for all Muslims to surrender to his vision of an original, authentic Islam such as he imagined had existed in the time of Muhammad. He successfully converted the Bedouins living in the deserts of Saudi Arabia, including Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud, the forerunner of the House of Sa'ud. Wahhab and Sa'ud agreed to coordinate to expand their influence and power. Sa'ud would be the political leader, the emir, and Wahhab would be the religious leader, the sheik.³³ So began one of the most influential movements that is impacting Islamic fundamentalism today.

From its beginning, Wahhabism declared the entirety of existing Islam to be unbelief, and traditional Muslims to be unbelievers subject to robbery, murder, and sexual violation. They viewed Shi'ite Muslims genocidally, as non-Muslims worthy of annihilation. According to Schwartz, this fundamentalist form of Islam attacked the traditional, spiritual Islam or Sufism that dominates in the Balkans, Turkey, Central Asia, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Additionally, Wahhabism has spawned so-called neo-Wahhabist movements such as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Pakistani Islamists, and Palestinian Hamas movement in Israel. Schwartz claims the majority of Islamic extremist violence in the world today can be attributed to Wahhabist inspired groups like al Qaeda or other terrorist movements that embrace this distinct ultra radical form of Islamism.³⁴

Although there is debate among Islamic scholars regarding exactly defining Wahhabism, there is little question of Saudi Arabia's embrace of this form of Islam. The supposed goal of the Wahhabi-Saudi alliance is to tear down the traditional Islam present from Bosnia-Herzegovina to South Africa, and from Morocco to the Philippines, and to replace it with their extremist, ultra-rigid, and puritanical version of Islam. They do this through indoctrination, infiltration, and financial subsidies from Saudis supporters. In addition to the main aim of capturing and guiding the global Islamic community, its doctrines are also deeply suffused with hatred of the other religions.³⁵ However, if Wahhabism is indeed the penetrating dogma behind much of the radical and fundamentalist Islam, is the Saudi state really a collaborator and sponsor of terrorists?

Battle for Heart of Islam in Saudi Arabia

Whether or not the Saudi state is a willing or unwilling sponsor of Wahhabi inspired Islamic radicals may depend on who is indeed ruling the roost. One very probable explanation is the struggle for influence and power between two ruling factions or fiefdoms in the royal family. Since King Fahd's stroke in 1995, the unanswered question of succession has remained. On one hand, Crown Prince Abdullah is the defacto head of the monarchy, but his power is not solidified. His half-brother and interior minister, Prince Nayef, controls the secret police and casts a longer and darker shadow.³⁶

The struggle for the heart of Islam in Saudi Arabia, and in effect the worldwide majority Sunni Muslims, may come down to which prince has the most influence. Abdullah is a moderate, a supporter of liberal political and economic reforms. He adheres to the Islamic doctrine of *Taqarub*. This doctrine supports rapprochement between Muslims and non-Muslims in addition to the notion of peaceful coexistence with

nonbelievers. Nayef, on the other hand, is a conservative who sides with the Wahhabi clerics and takes directions from an anti-American religious establishment that shares many goals with al Qaeda. Nayef supports the Islamic doctrine of *Tawhid*, or monotheism as defined by Wahhab. For the most radical clerics, this doctrine promotes a puritanical form of Islam whose enemies include Christians, Jews, Shi'ites, and moderate Sunni Muslims. In foreign policy, this doctrine translates into support for jihad and worldwide funding for Wahhabism³⁷

Additionally, one should not underestimate the Wahhabi radicals' hatred and fear of Shi'ites. As much as the radicals dislike the Abdullah's moderate sentiments, they may be willing to live with his control of Saudi Arabia as long as the Wahhabi clerics do not perceive a political compromise with Shi'ites. The Shi'ites offer an alternative notion of Islamic community and history, in addition to political interests that coincide with those of Sunni reformers. The Wahhabis' worst nightmare is a powerful political bloc forming between moderate reformers throughout the Islamic world, both Sunni and Shi'ite.³⁸

The winds of moderate reform in the Islamic world, whether with democratic overtones and simply traditional Islamic theology, are of great concern to fundamentalists inside and outside of Saudi Arabia. This struggle for the soul of Islam, both in Saudi Arabia as the financial and doctrinal supporter and the wider Islamic world, could have implications for all regions of the world, including Latin America and the Caribbean.

Clash or Collusion of Islamic Fundamentalists?

In a short 17 pages, it is a challenge to develop a concise and comprehensive perspective of Islam, or even Islamic fundamentalism. It does not take one very long to discover the wide variety of explanations and opinions of this religion. In many cases, as

more “layers of the onion” are uncovered, Islamic fundamentalism becomes even more perplexing and confusing.

Several broad conclusions about Islam can be drawn. First, there is a general tendency for the vast majority of Muslims is to tightly fuse politics and religion together, whether traditional or fundamentalist, Sunni or Shi’ite. Second, Islamic followers are generally of two types: devout fundamentalists Muslims who adhere to the letter of the law or what they think is the letter of the law, and moderates who are to a varying degree Muslim by birth, culture, or tradition. What makes these moderates unique is a tendency to either implicitly support the actions of the fundamentalists, or just remain silent. It’s unusual to hear much Islamic moderates condemn fundamentalists’ actions. Third, what makes Islamic fundamentalists different from other religious fundamentalists and inherently more threatening to the U.S. from a national security point of view is their belief in violence to proliferate, enforce, and spread Islam. Finally, this devout core of believers may not just be fringe, although they probably only represent a small minority of the over one billion Muslims in the world.

As was clearly displayed on 9/11, the struggle occurring in the Islamic world does have implications for the rest of the world. The following chapter will explore whether Islamic fundamentalism is having an impact on Latin America and if there is a connection to the turmoil in the Islamic world.

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Chapter 3

Islamic Fundamentalism in Latin America and the Caribbean

Islamic fundamentalism and terrorist activity in Latin America, whether it's the unsolved 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires or fund raising in the “wild west” Tri-Border Area between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, does have a connection to what's happening in the Middle East. This terrorist activity was part, and remains a part, of the global collision between those that uphold Western ideals and Islamic fundamentalists who do not hold a democratic world-view. Because of this nexus, discovering who or what is driving the Islamic fundamentalist “train” in Latin America and the Caribbean is significant. Is it the Iranian/Syrian/Lebanese inspired Hezbollah Shi'ites, the Sunni/Wahabbi motivated al Qaeda, or somebody else? Additionally, maybe these terrorist groups are now collaborating and morphing into new types of terrorist organizations.

Islamic Fundamentalism in Latin America and the Caribbean

For North Americans, Latin America is a generally misunderstood region and much more diverse than many North Americans realize. Even the topic of Islamic fundamentalism in Latin America is met with skepticism.

Latin American society displays startling contrasts between rich and poor, learned and illiterate, and democracy and dictatorship. Although Latin America and the

Caribbean are home to almost 500 million inhabitants, it is a mistake to assume everyone speaks Spanish and attends Catholic Mass. Granted, most inhabitants of the region are Catholic and are either of indigenous or Latin background (Spanish, Italian, or Portuguese).¹ However, similar to the U.S., just about every ethnic background in the world is represented. These groups include everyone from Africans forced over to Latin America during slavery to small groups of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants.

In these small pockets of Arab, Indian, and African immigrants, Islam gained a small footprint in Latin America and the Caribbean. An insightful example of how someone from one of these small pockets gained prominence is former Argentine President Carlos Menem. Born in Argentina of Syrian Muslim parents,² he converted to Catholicism in order to become the President in 1989.

Muslim Demographics in Region

Muslims make up only a very small percentage of the almost 500 million inhabitants. Although difficult to number with any great precision, Muslims represent probably less than one percent of the total population. Even by the most optimistic projections from Islamic sources, the total number of Muslims is probably around six million or less. This same source notes the number of Islamic followers in Brazil at 1.5 million (less than one percent of the population) and in Argentina, 700,000 (two percent of the population).³

An additional Islamic source indicates an even smaller percentage in Brazil; around one million including 10,000 converts to Islam.⁴ This low number of Islamic converts versus Muslims by ethnicity, birth, or immigration could indicate a fairly tight

or closed Islamic community at least in Brazil. More likely, Islam simply does not have much appeal to Brazilians.

Whatever the exact number of Brazilian Muslims, the majority are Syrian and Lebanese immigrants and their descendants. However, some 11 million Syrian and Lebanese immigrants live throughout Brazil and just over 10 percent consider themselves Muslims, while the vast majority claim the Catholic faith.⁵

Argentina has one of the most active Islamic groups in the regions, called Islamic Organization of Latin America (IOLA). This is due to the slightly higher percentage of Muslims in Argentina, plus the boost of having the largest mosque in Latin America. The King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center in Buenos Aires is a \$22 million structure center completed in 2000 and inaugurated with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah in attendance. The Center sits on 7-1/2 acres of prime real estate valued at between \$20 and \$40 million that was donated by Menem during his presidency. The 390,000-square-foot-building has an auditorium, a primary and secondary school, dormitories, and underground parking.⁶

Furthermore, IOLA holds events to promote the unification of Muslims living in the region as well as the propagation of Islam. In March of last year, IOLA sent 13 young Muslims from Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia, Paraguay, Venezuela, Margarita Island, Curacao, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Ecuador to Hajj.⁷ This representation of countries may be a good sample of the distribution of Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean.

These small groups of Muslims spread throughout the region can take aback even experienced diplomats knowledgeable on Latin America. Following the death of the

Iranian Shi'ite leader ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, a 35-year American foreign service veteran was visiting a small town in the southern Brazilian state of Parana. He remembers being surprised to find three mosques full of Muslim Arabs mourning the death of Khomeini.⁸

The demographics in the Caribbean are similar to Latin America at around one percent of the total population, or 300,000 Muslims, but with two notable exceptions in the English and Dutch speaking communities. The highest percentage of Muslims in the entire region exists in Dutch Suriname, at just over 28 percent of the 425,000 inhabitants.⁹ These Muslims are primarily Javanese from Indonesia, Indo-Pakistanis who came as indentured laborers more than 100 years ago, and the Afro-Surinamese. The 140,000 English-speaking Muslims are located primarily in Guyana (70,000 representing 10 percent of population), and Trinidad and Tobago (70,000 representing six percent of population).¹⁰

Additionally, the only two countries in the Western hemisphere that are members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) are Guyana (joined in 1998) and Suriname (joined in 1996). There is a growing Arab Islamic influence in both countries since joining the OIC. However, because their tradition and ethnic background are rooted primarily in Java and Indo-Pakistan, Arabic is generally not spoken in the mosque and some of their practices could be considered unorthodox. For that reason, some Guyanese Muslims have trained in Saudi Arabia with the thought of helping to “purify” Islamic practices in Guyana.¹¹

Islamic Terrorist Attacks in Region

The Islamic demographics in Latin America and the Caribbean lead to no particularly startling clues about Islamic fundamentalism or terrorism in the region. Granted, Guyana and Suriname are recent members of the OIC, but these two countries have no history of violent Islamic activity and only a minimal connection to Islamic fundamentalism. Other than Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago, the extremely low percentage of Muslims in each of the countries in the region hardly raises an eyebrow. When one looks within these pockets of Islamic followers, is there a history of Islamic terrorism or radicalism that is useful for clues about future activity? Unfortunately, the history of terrorism in Latin America is full of examples from revolutionary organizations such as Peru's Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) and Colombia's FARC, but these movements are not Islamic. Nevertheless, there are a few limited examples in the region.

Trinidad and Tobago

In July 1990, there was a coup attempt in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad by a black radical Muslim organization called Jamaat al Muslimeen. Yasin Abu Bakr and 114 rebels who set off a car bomb that gutted the police station in front of the Parliament led the coup attempt and then they stormed into the legislature, spraying bullets, to gain control. The rebels took over the television station to announce they had seized control of the country. A six-day hostage crisis ensued while the rebels held Prime Minister Robinson and his Cabinet. Twenty-five people were killed during the crisis. The rebels surrendered after a negotiated settlement with the government with the help of U.S. and U.K. Ambassadors and Caribbean Community (CARICOM).¹²

Surprisingly, the trigger for the coup attempt was denial of building permit for a mosque. Discontent in the black Islamic community had been brewing for over 20 years due to struggles over government policies. Additionally, after the failed coup attempt the government razed Jamaat's compound consisting of a school and medical clinic. However, 10 years later the government made its first payment of \$195,000 to Jamaat's members for damage incurred to their compound. This action followed a \$2.3 million fine on 58 Muslim radicals by Trinidad's high court for the bombing on the country's police headquarters.¹³

Buenos Aires

The 1992 suicide bombing on the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires is arguably the first Islamic terrorist attack in South America. Although the attack has yet to be officially solved, the bulk of the evidence points to the Iranian-backed Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah. A car, driven by a suicide bomber and loaded with explosives, smashed into the front of the embassy and detonated. The attack wounded 242 people and killed 29 Israelis and Argentine civilians. The motive for the attack probably came one month before the bombing. Israeli gunships attacked a motorcade in southern Lebanon, killing Shiek Abbas al-Musawi, the leader of the Hezbollah terrorist group.¹⁴

While investigation of the Embassy bombing languished for over two years in the Argentine Supreme Court, another even more devastating terrorist bombing struck Buenos Aires' large Jewish community. This time the Argentina Jewish Mutual Aid Association (AMIA) was bombed resulting in 87 deaths and over 100 injuries.¹⁵

Although there were several breakthroughs in the two bombing investigations, both cases are still open. Despite repeated denials by governments of Iran and Argentina,

several important pieces of evidence possibly point to their involvement or at least a desire to let the cases remain unsolved. A 1998 telephone call intercepted from the Iranian embassy in Argentina demonstrated their involvement in the Israeli embassy attack and led to the expulsion of six of the seven Iranian diplomats.¹⁶ The languishing cases could also be attributed to the involvement of former President Menem. According to the New York Times who obtained a 100-page Argentine secret deposition, the Iranian government paid Menem \$10 million to cover it up.¹⁷ Regardless of who committed the bombings and who is responsible for delaying justice and culpability in the cases, the dynamic combination of Menem's Islamic heritage, the large Jewish population in Buenos Aires, and the quick retribution of Hezbollah seem to point to an environment ripe for Islamic terrorism and/or support.

Islamic Terrorist Support in Region

The two bombings in Buenos Aires probably committed by Hezbollah and the attempted coup in Trinidad by Jamaat al Muslimeen hardly constitute a profound and deep history of Islamic terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean, and these activities occurred almost more than 10 years ago. Although Latin American countries have struggled with domestic terrorism for decades, Islamic terrorist attacks do not seem to register high on the anxiety scale. Should US policy makers still be concerned about Islamic fundamentalists activities in the region? Even though no bombings attributed to Islamic fundamentalists have occurred since 1994, there is a more recent history of Islamic fundamentalists' support activities. The two geographic areas of primary concern are Venezuela's Margarita Island and the Tri-Border Area (TBA) between Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil.

Tri-Border Area

The TBA has a somewhat “wild west” reputation and a loose rule of law even by Latin American standards, especially on the Paraguayan side of the border. There is a large Arab community (roughly 30,000) primarily made up of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants involved in business enterprises, both legal and illegal. Hezbollah and Hamas have a history stretching back a couple of decades of using the TBA for fund raising and support. Although the area had been monitored for some time, the 1992 bombing in Buenos Aires began a period of closer scrutiny of the area. However, the attacks on 9/11 were the trigger that brought renewed attention to the area.¹⁸

The area has been and remains a haven for illicit activities by organized crime and probably terrorist groups. These groups use the TBA for smuggling, money laundering, product piracy, and drug and arms trafficking. The geography, social climate, economy, and the loose political environment allow for criminals and corrupt officials to thrive by exchanging bribes or payoffs. The difficulty is determining whether the activities are crime and/or terrorism related. Numerous organized crime groups, including the Lebanese and Chinese Mafias, are known to use the TBA for illicit activities. Just reviewing the amount of financial “transactions” is staggering. As an example of the level of money flows, the Paraguayan city of Cuidad del Este generated US\$12 to \$13 billion in cash transactions annually as of 2001, making it the third city worldwide behind Hong Kong and Miami. However, this figure has probably fallen as a result of closer Argentine and Brazilian customs controls.¹⁹

Unknown is exactly what portion of this illicit behavior Islamic fundamentalists or terrorist groups commit. According to fairly recent and extensive Library of Congress

Federal Research Report on the TBA, various Islamic terrorist groups have used the TBA for fund-raising, drug trafficking, money laundering, plotting, and other activities in support of their organizations. From 1999 to 2001, Islamic extremist groups, specifically Hezbollah and Hamas, received a total of between US\$50 and US\$500 million from Arab residents of the Brazilian side of the border through Paraguayan financial institutions.²⁰

In addition to Hezbollah and Hamas, other Islamic terrorist groups thought to have a presence include Egypt's Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, Al-Jihad (Islamic Jihad), al Qaeda, and al-Muqawamah, which is a pro-Iranian wing of the Lebanon-based Hezbollah. Additionally, the large Arab community in the TBA is highly conducive to using the region for the establishment of sleeper cells. Although the TBA has one of the largest concentration of Islamic extremists in Latin America, as many as 11,000 members of the Islamic community of TBA may have moved since late 2001 to other less closely watched Arab population center in South America.²¹ The bottom line is the TBA remains a fertile ground for illegal and unlawful behavior, but probably not quite to the same extent as pre-9/11.

Margarita Island

Islamic support activities of a similar nature may be occurring in other areas of Latin America with small groups of Muslims. Although somewhat difficult to determine with exactness, research suggests that where pockets of Arab immigrants and/or followers of Islam exist, there is a potential for illicit support activity. One such example is the resort island off the coast of Venezuela and home to around 4,000 Arab immigrants, primarily Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese. Although this is a small percentage of the island's 300,000 residents and an even smaller percentage of the

estimated 600,000 Venezuelan citizens of Arab descent, there are strong indications of support activities for Islamic terrorists.²²

Despite having only a small percentage of the island's population, the Arabs' exert a disproportionate influence on daily life because of their economic clout. The local cable television outlet carries al-Jazeera as well as channels from Lebanon and Syria. Women in headscarves work cash registers, and on most shop counters, verses of the Koran are on display. The Arabs are involved in retail businesses as well as travel agencies and banks. The Venezuelan government is apparently aware of the Arabs' presence on the island and is investigating the allegations, but has found no terrorism links.²³

Additionally, during an address by the Venezuela's ambassador to the U.S. last October at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California-Berkeley, he denied accusations against the Chavez's government that it has supported international terrorism. The ambassador dismissed the accusations of Venezuela providing training for al Qaeda terrorists on Margarita Island as out of hand.²⁴

Nevertheless in a speech last year by General James Hill, the SOUTHCOM Commander, he specifically cited the existence of Islamic terrorist support activities in the TBA and Margarita Island. He elaborated on a connection between narco-traffickers and Islamic terrorists who generate funds by money laundering, document forgery, and arms trafficking. In blunt language he said, "Simply put, direct drug sales and money laundering fund worldwide terrorists operations. That is fact, not speculation."²⁵

Muslims' Geographic Connection with Terrorism

Although difficult to prove with certainty, the persistent connections between the Muslims in Latin America and the presence of Islamic terrorism or support suggest a pattern. This blueprint indicates that if Islamic terrorists desire to use the region for safe haven purposes, raise financial support through illicit activities, and launder money, etc., they will congregate with or near followers of Islam. This is neither a startling discovery nor a profound concept; it simply follows what Islamic terrorists do in other areas of the world with Islamic populations. What makes Latin America and the Caribbean unique are a number of factors.

Islamic terrorism and support in this region is exceptional due to the demographics, geography, and loose rule of law. With few exceptions, each of the countries in the region have extremely high percentages of Catholics and very low percentages of Muslims. Even then, the vast majority of Arab immigrants are not Muslims, but Lebanese and Syrian Catholics. The tendency is for this minority of Muslims to collect in pockets, whether in the TBA, Margarita Island, or Buenos Aires. Additionally and probably more noteworthy, these pockets of Muslims tend to be either Lebanese or Syrian immigrants and followers of Shi'ism, not Sunni Islam or Wahabbism. The major exceptions to this finding are Guyana, Surinam, and Trinidad and Tobago with their Javanese, Indo-Pakistan, or African heritage. They are not Shi'ites, but neither are they devout followers of Sunni Islam or Wahabbism despite attempts to "purify" their doctrine.

The historical evidence of Islamic terrorist events over the past couple of decades confirms this pattern. Although unresolved, the two Islamic terrorist bombings in

Buenos Aires point to Hezbollah presence and support in Argentina. The attempted coup in Trinidad and Tobago is attributed to the black Islamic group Jamaat-al-Musilmeen. Although Sunni followers of Islam make up the majority of Muslims in the world, this is not the demographic case in Latin America.

The wide-open geography and loose rule of law in Latin America also create a different dynamic than other areas of the world. Much of Latin America was developed around city centers that have grown into sprawling metropolitan areas like Buenos Aires or Sao Paulo. At the same time, there are large sections of undeveloped, ungoverned, and unpopulated areas that are vulnerable to misuse and illicit activities. Both of these geographic phenomena give rise to exploitation not only by all types of criminals and terrorists, but also Islamic terrorists. Gen Hill summed up his view about the region's susceptibility last year:

Today's foe is the terrorist, the narco-trafficker, the arms trafficker, the document forger, the international crime boss, and the money launderer. This threat is a weed that is planted, grown, and nurtured in the fertile ground of ungoverned spaces such as coastlines, rivers, and unpopulated border areas. This threat is watered and fertilized with money from drugs, illegal arms sales, and human trafficking. This threat respects neither geographical nor moral boundaries.²⁶

This does not mean there is a clear nexus or connection between Islamic terrorists and narco-terrorists. But it does mean the region has the right ingredients to foster the kind of support environment desired by Islamic terrorists. Even though places like the TBA appear as a tangled web between organized crime groups and Islamic terrorists, Gen Hill does not believe there is cooperation and collaboration between the two.²⁷

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Chapter 4

Today's Islamic Threat

Arguably, the attention of the U.S. security policy establishment is more focused on Islamic fundamentalist terrorism than simply “terrorism.” Furthermore, most of this interest is concentrated on Iraq and Afghanistan. The outcome of the struggle occurring in the Islamic world between the fundamentalists and the moderates is not just of utmost importance to the future of the Middle East, but also other regions of the world. Although Shi’ite fundamentalists such as Hezbollah certainly remain a threat, especially to Israel, it’s the Sunni Wahabbi-fueled fundamentalists such as al Qaeda who posed the greater threat to U.S. national security interests. Thankfully, there does not seem to be much presence of Wahabbi Islamic fundamentalists in the region. Therefore, that could mean the security concerns for Latin America and the Caribbean are less than initially thought. Nevertheless, one cannot discount the role of Hezbollah Shi’ites, ad hoc Islamic fundamentalist groups, or possible connections between Wahabbis, Hezbollah, and/or drug traffickers.

What, Who, and Where is the Islamic Terrorist Threat?

Except for Guyana, Surinam, and Trinidad, the Muslim demographics in Latin America point to a preponderance of Lebanese and Syrian Shi’ites, not Sunnis. Are

Shi'ite fundamentalists embedded in these pockets of Islamic followers cooperating with al Qaeda or other branches of radical Sunni Wahabbis?

Hezbollah-al Qaeda Connection?

According to the Director of the CIA this could be occurring in lawless regions like the TBA and Margarita Island. He is noticing an increase in low-level cooperation between al Qaeda and Hezbollah. He confirms that a “mixing and matching of capabilities, swapping of training, and the use of common facilities” could be happening.¹

Jessica Stern also points out several changes in the way terrorist organizations, especially al Qaeda, may be operating since the crackdown in Afghanistan. She claims al Qaeda is willing to make unlikely alliances with other Islamic terrorists groups like Hezbollah in order to expand their reach. Additionally, these groups may have morphed into less hierarchical and leaderless organizations to avoid detection. The leaders inspire small cells or individuals to take action on their own initiative instead of taking orders from above. She also claims Islamic terrorists are forging ties with traditionally organized crime groups.² If these developments are true, the threat in areas with Islamic fundamentalists in Latin America could intensify.

A recent intelligence report obtained by the Boston Globe seems to confirm this transformation. The report indicates US efforts against al Qaeda are hastening its evolution from a network bound by a centralized control model of dominant figures with strong jihadist pedigrees to again resemble loosely knit groups headed by talented operatives at the local level.³ This change may step up efforts by Islamic groups “sleeper cells” in Latin America to seize the initiative rather than wait for guidance from above, or to even cooperate and collaborate with Hezbollah.

Ad Hoc Radical Fundamentalists Threat

Another potential concern could be ad hoc radical fundamentalists groups forming within these small pockets of Islamic followers without any particular tie to a state support or Islamic doctrine. These groups may operate on a global scale and claim to act for Islam. These ad hoc groups could form quickly, need no headquarters, and have no recognized leaders. These characteristics make them more difficult to track and apprehend than members of established groups.⁴ Even with all of the tools available to U.S. authorities, detecting and finding Islamic terrorists in the U.S. is difficult—imagine how much more challenging the task is in Latin America.

Potential ad hoc Islamic fundamentalist groups in South America and the Caribbean pose a particular threat because of the fluid nature of their organization, or even lack of a formal organization. These groups can come together to carry out a single operation, such as the group responsible for the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. U.S. authorities have a difficult time detecting and infiltrating these groups since they exist for a limited period of time.⁵

An example of this type of organization may have been a potential hijacking of an aircraft by nine Islamic Bangladeshis in Santa Cruz, Bolivia in early December 2003. The Bangladeshis allegedly planned to attack an American target in Argentina with an aircraft. The nine had been in Bolivia for a year when their suspected plot was revealed to authorities by the French police attaché. It was reported that the group was planning to fly to Buenos Aires on 2 Dec, but Aerolineas Argentina cancelled the flight at the last minute. Apparently, the French intelligence services received information that led them

to think citizens from Bangladesh may board planes in South America, hijack them, and crash them against US targets.⁶

An Islamic Terrorist and Drug Trafficker Nexus?

Even though Gen Hill minimizes the connection between narco-terrorists and Islamic fundamentalists in Latin America, some experts are increasingly worried about such a possibility. Harold Wankel, the assistant administrator for intelligence at the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, recently expressed a concern that al Qaeda terrorists will turn to international drug trafficking and Colombian and/or Mexican organized crime to transport funds, people, and banned weapons.⁷

Wankel's anxiety stems from his knowledge of the organized crime groups' infrastructure and how valuable their network may be to al Qaeda.

If al-Qaida comes to South America and they need to get something done in the United States that requires movement, whether it is movement of commodity or movement of people, they need not set up infrastructure, they need not set up an operation capable of doing that. They need to get x-number of dollars and go to the people who are the professionals, the people that are the best at it, and that is the Colombian and Mexican organized criminal groups that are closely aligned these days.⁸

He especially worries about al Qaeda sympathizers in Latin America who could turn to the drug trafficking network as the international crackdown on Islamic terrorists' finances dries up funds. However at this point, it is unclear whether al Qaeda has benefited from drug trafficking or cooperation from the narco-terrorists in the region.⁹

Although not in Latin America, the first empirical evidence linking al Qaeda with the drug trade was discovered just a couple of months ago in the Middle East, according to a RAND terrorism expert. The U.S. Navy seized a boat carrying nearly 2 tons of hashish in the Persian Gulf and three men believed to have al Qaeda connections. The

drugs are worth between US\$8 and US\$10 million. Probably due to the huge profit margins involved in the drug trade, the trafficking in drugs could be becoming an attractive opportunity for al Qaeda to rebuild their finances.¹⁰

Even though the principal Islamic terrorist threat in Latin America appears more aligned with support activities rather than attacking targets in the region, are there potential areas that could be vulnerable to a strike?

Potential Islamic Terrorist Target

The purpose of this paper is not to identify every potential target for Islamic terrorists, but to only give an example to stimulate thinking on the subject. Thankfully, there are not a significant number of potential U.S. targets in the region for Islamic terrorists to attack beyond embassies and multinational businesses. Except for potential diplomatic targets like embassies and consulates, are there other possible vulnerabilities and weak spots in Latin America that are ripe for an attack by Islamic terrorists? One example may be the U.S. dependence on the region's energy exports.

Energy Dependence

Western dependence on imported petroleum and natural gas is no great secret. It is also not a great surprise that Islamic terrorists may target energy production and the transportation supply chain. If there are any doubts about vulnerability, the recent bombing of the French-flagged supertanker Limburg off the coast of Yemen in October 2002 serves as an example. The U.S. dependence on oil imports will grow from more than 50 percent today to over 60 percent by 2010.¹¹ Given the rising U.S. dependence on

oil and natural gas resources, an attack on these imports could bring significant economic disruption.

Today the U.S. imports a significant amount of petroleum from Latin America. Of the top 15 countries that export crude oil to the U.S., seven are located in the Western hemisphere including Canada. Venezuela has at times exported more to the U.S. than Saudi Arabia, and Mexican exports are not far behind.¹²

Additionally, tiny Trinidad and Tobago is the number one exporter of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) to the U.S.¹³ These exports have grown from zero exports to the U.S. in 1998 to supplying almost three quarters imports of LNG, mainly to terminals along the Eastern seaboard. Most of the deliveries are from Supertankers holding millions of gallons of super-chilled LNG that dock at the terminals to unload their cargo, which would be converted to the vaporous form of natural gas for consumer use. In the hands of a creative terrorist, these transfer points may be potential magnet for a debilitating strike.

Hitting a target like a LNG transfer point could be accomplished by any group of terrorists, Islamic or otherwise. However, due to the minimal Wahabbi-Sunni fundamentalist presence in the region, an al Qaeda hit may be unlikely. Nevertheless, one cannot completely discount the possible role of Hezbollah Shi'ites, ad hoc Islamic fundamentalist groups, or possible connections between Wahhabis, Hezbollah, and/or drug traffickers.

¹ Jessica Stern, "The Protean Enemy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2003, n.p., on-line, Internet, 19 February 2004, available from <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20030701faessay15403/jessica-stern/the-protean-enemy.html>.

² Ibid. n.p.

³ Bryan Bender, "Local groups giving Qaeda strength, analysis finds," *Boston Globe*, 21 November 2003, A42.

⁴ Jessica Stern, *The Ultimate Terrorists*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6-7.

⁵ Ibid., 82-86.

⁶ Alvaro Zuazo, "Bolivia probing 9 in hijack threat," *Boston Globe*, 6 December, 2003, A6.

⁷ Jenny Falcon, "US Official: Al-Qaeda, Drug Traffickers May Establish Ties," *Voice of America*, 2 March 2004, n.p., on-line, Internet, 2 March 2004, available from <http://www.voanews.com/article.cfm?objectID=BD81DAD9-32C8-41EE-AAC3FBF774EEE>.

⁸ Ibid., n.p.

⁹ Ibid., n.p.

¹⁰ Matt Kelley, "Qaeda link to drugs hinted," *Boston Globe*, 19 December 2003, A6.

¹¹ Tamara Makarenko, "Terrorist threat to energy infrastructure increases," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 1 June 2003.

¹² U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, "Crude Oil and Total Petroleum Imports Top 15 Countries," 24 February 2004, n.p., on-line, Internet, 2 March 2004, available from http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data.

¹³ U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, "Natural Gas Imports and Exports," 24 February 2004, n.p., on-line, Internet, 2 March 2004, available from http://www.eia.doe.gov/pub/oil_gas/petroleum/data.

Chapter 5

Policy Recommendations

One can certainly find other potential vulnerabilities, but thankfully Latin America is not a “target rich” environment. The larger concern may be how differently the U.S. and Latin American countries perceive the primary security threats facing the region. Addressing this issue and before making effective policy recommendations, the wide gulf between these perceptions should be addressed. These differences are especially challenging due to the cultural differences between the U.S. and Latin America and the long history of troubled relations.

Perceptions of the Primary Threat Facing Region

The cultural differences and distinctive concerns between the US and Latin America at times causes friction. For the recommended solutions to chance at success, the two parties must address these differences and reach consensus. Probably without realizing it, this divide was unintentionally highlighted by Secretary of State Powell at the annual assembly of the Organization of American States in Chile on 9 June 2003. While for the most part the representatives of the 33 other nations emphasized the need for social justice, warning that democracy itself could be threatened by mounting economic difficulties and inequality, Mr. Powell was nearly alone in focusing on the

triple scourge he described as “tyrants, traffickers, and terrorists.”¹ At least recognizing and hopefully narrowing this rift in the perceptions of the primary threat facing Latin America may give hope in areas such as enhancing regional engagement and cooperation, strengthening monitoring efforts, and seeking to eliminate and minimize the criminal support activities.

Regional Engagement and Cooperation

Nevertheless, there are several examples of successful engagement in the region that can be further expanded or used as models for other forums. One of the best models of cooperation and collaboration is the Organization of American States’ Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism (CICTE). A similar, but slightly more focused example of teamwork between the U.S. and the countries bordering the TBA is the “Three +One” initiative. Finally, a regional round-table made up of 19 Latin American states called the Rio Group is developing initiatives to improve security and minimize threats.

The CICTE forum was conceived in the mid-1990s after the two bombings in Buenos Aires. After 9/11, CICTE took on a new sense of urgency and the frequency of the meetings has increased dramatically. The mission of CICTE is straightforward: coordinate efforts to protect the citizens of the member nations from the scourges of terrorism through the exchange of information between subject matter experts and decision makers to strengthen hemispheric solidarity and security.²

According to Ambassador Cofer Black, the State Department’s Coordinator of Counterterrorism, CICTE has established itself as one of the foremost regional anti-

terrorism bodies in the world and is recognized by the UN as a model to emulate. CICTE has developed an ambitious program focused on strengthening border and financial controls and developing sound counter-terrorism legal regimes.³ For example, at the last session in Montevideo in January 2004, the need to strengthen CICTE was recognized, as well as an approved work plan to deal with aviation, port, and cyber security.⁴

The Tripartite Commission of the Triple Frontier was established as a security mechanism by the three TBA countries in 1998. When the U.S. joins these meetings such as in December 2003 in Asuncion, it becomes the “Three + One” group. Three + One serves as a continuing forum of counterterrorism cooperation and prevention among all four countries. During the most recent meeting, the parties discussed and analyzed preventive actions against terrorism such as strengthening financial institutions, money-laundering legislation, and drug and arms trafficking, as well as cooperation on the exchange of information and law enforcement, etc.⁵

The U.S. Ambassador to Brazil, Donna Hrinak, recently highlighted the growing effectiveness of security collaboration in the TBA. “Contrary to what you’re hearing in the Press, the Brazilians are closely watching the TBA and cooperating with the U.S. We are pleased with their level of support and the progress on clamping down on the illicit activities in the TBA.”⁶

Although more liberal and less specific in nature, the Rio Group is striving to tackle some of the same issues at CICTE and “3+1” forums. Rio Group’s primary concerns are threats to democratic governance, stability of its institutions, and to social

peace. These 19 Latin American countries support a multilateral system for peace and security and view all terrorism as a threat to these goals.⁷

Improve Rule of Law and Eradicate Criminal Activities

One of the struggles in Latin America is democratic governance and following the rule of law. Although progress is apparently being made in cooperation and collaboration with the forums noted above, the challenge is implementing and executing the policies at the worker level. Simply because “agreed upon” security policies and procedures that are formed at the international level does not mean the plan will be lawfully executed. For example, there are existing laws that prohibit the illicit dealings in the TBA and Margarita Island, but these profitable criminal activities continue. The concern of this study is on Islamic terrorists, but whether the profits are used as support for terrorism or pure greed on the part of the mafia groups, the solutions are similar: seek to eradicate the lawlessness in those regions where it flourishes. This is where improving the rule of law with regional cooperation is critical.

The challenge is outlined in the definitive Library of Congress study on terrorist and organized crime groups in the TBA. Widespread corruption at all levels of government and police is facilitating the activities of the Islamic terrorist groups and organized crime. Also, the capabilities of the current security and investigative forces are inadequate for ridding the region of the problem. Finally, the laws for combating terrorist fund-raising, money laundering, organized crime activities, and official corruption are also inadequate.⁸

The strained relations between the U.S. government and some Latin America countries are increasing the challenge. However, CICTE and the “3+1” are excellent examples of working together to combat the terrorism and the criminal activities that support it. The stepped up efforts by governments of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguayan to fight illicit activities by organized crime and terrorist groups in the TBA seems to have helped reduce these behaviors, but by no means eliminated them. U.S. dealings with Venezuela and President Hugo Chavez over the activities on Margarita Island may have to wait relations improve.

¹ Boris Saavedra, “Confronting Terrorism in Latin America: Latin America and United States Policy Implications,” *Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, National Defense University*, April 2003, p. 220.

² Organization of American States, Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism web site, 2002, n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 March 2004, available from <http://www.cicte.oas.org/mission.htm>.

³ U.S. Department of State, Foreign Press Center Briefing, “Counterterrorism Efforts in the Organization of American States,” with Ambassador Cofer Black and Ambassador John Maisto, Washington, D.C., 23 January 2004, n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 March 2004, available from <http://www.fpc.state.gov/28457.htm>.

⁴ Draft Work Plan of CICTE and the Montevideo Declaration, *Summit of the Americas Information Network*, 4 February 2004, n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 March 2004, available from <http://www.summitt-americas.org/Quebec-hem-security.htm>

⁵ U.S. Department of State press release, “Meeting of the “3+1” Counterterrorism Group—Communique,” 3 December 2003. n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 March 2004, available from <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/other/2003/27057.htm>.

⁶ A question and answer forum at Harvard University’s David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies with Ambassador Donna Hrinak, 9 March 2004, attended by Curtis Connell, notes used for information.

⁷ Andean Community, General Secretariat, “The Cusco Consensus,” May 2003, n.p., on-line, Internet, 5 March 2004, available from <http://www.comunidadandina.org/ingles/document/GrupoRioXVII.htm>.

⁸ Rex Hudson, “Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America,” The Library of Congress, Federal Research Division, July 2003, 69-70.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Who will prevail in the battle for the heart of Islam, the moderates or the fundamentalists? The confrontationalists posit the clash could be a long-term struggle with repercussions not only for the U.S., but also for regions like Latin America where pockets of Islamic followers exist. If accommodationalists like Esposito are correct, addressing and solving the causes of the conflict will help minimize, if not eliminate Islamic terrorism. In either case, the implications for how the U.S. security establishment addresses Islamic terrorism and terrorist support in Latin America and the Caribbean are profound.

If the Wahabbi-fueled fundamentalism grows and gains a stronger foothold throughout the Islamic world, research suggests the minimal threat in Latin America could increase. On the other hand, the vast majority of Muslims may repudiate the Islamic radicals and fundamentalists and embrace moderation and democracy, so the Islamic threat in the region could eventually evaporate. However, the CENTCOM Commander General John Abizaid says it is going to be a long-term battle: “I think this battle of moderation versus extremism in this part of the world in particular is one that will continue well beyond the point where I’m retired.”¹ Nevertheless, security policy

makers do not have the luxury of waiting a generation for results, but must act now by answering the hard questions and developing policy accordingly.

There are two broad and strategic questions about Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in Latin America. Despite the lack of a broad demographic or cultural connection with Lebanese and Syrian immigrant Muslims in the region, will Al Qaeda seek to develop a foothold in Latin America to sustain or expand their operations? Next, will Shi'ite groups such as Hezbollah continue their low profile maintained over the last 10 years, using the region for support activities but not direct attacks, or will they join forces with Wahabbi-oriented Sunnis fundamentalists in a clash against the West?

Research suggests two conclusions. First, the Islamic threat from Al Qaeda probably will not gain traction in Latin America due to the less than fertile ground for that form of Islamic fundamentalism. Not only are there very low percentages of all types of Muslims in the region, but also the demographics suggest the majority are Shi'ite Muslims, not “Wahhabi-fueled” fundamentalist Sunni Muslims. Secondly, Shi'ite fundamentalist groups like Hezbollah may strive to continue using lawless areas like the TBA and other smaller pockets in the region, but extra surveillance and increased attention by the U.S. in cooperation with Latin American partners will help control the problem.

¹ Robert Burns, “Key general sees needs beyond Iraq,” *Boston Globe*, 9 March 2004, p. A9.

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